

Eleanor Emma Waring (Sister Emma)

Research Team

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Eleanor Emma Waring was born in the fourth quarter of 1838 and was baptised in Lyme Regis parish Church Jan 17th 1839 (her name here is clearly written as Helena). Her parents were Catherine (née Rankin) and Henry Franks Waring, her father was a solicitor and Town Clerk in Lyme Regis. Eleanor was the fourth child out of eleven, (3 boys, 8 girls)

Between 1854 and 57 Eleanor was studying at Bedford College for Women (founded 1849, the first Higher Education College for women in the country). In 1864 she was working in an unknown nursing home. In 1869 she became a nun joining the Anglican Community of St John the Baptist, first at Bovey Tracey in Devon then in New York. In 1875 she was sent to their house in Clewer, part of Windsor in Berkshire. She soon became concerned at the problem boys in the area who were not being properly treated at home, and eventually was instrumental in her order starting the St Augustine's Boy's Home to give the boys a settled environment. Many went on to join the Army or Navy, or find other jobs. The nuns had to beg for money to support these children. Sister Emma stayed at Clewer until her death on 22 March 1909 when she died, aged 71.

Eleanor Emma (Nellie) Waring is believed to be the author of "Peeps into An Old Playground - Memories of the Past", by S E (*Sister Emma?*). This contains her memories of life when she was growing up in Lyme Regis, describing many of the interesting people in the town. A copy was given to the Museum in 1987 by Constance Jacob. (Notes by JF on an accompanying envelope indicate that it was written by Eleanor Emma (Nellie) Waring in 1895).

An unusual twist to the story of Eleanor Waring came to light later. In 1909 she was interviewed by Cecil Sharp at the Anglican convent of the Community of St John Baptist, Clewer during the month before she died. Sharp was important as he was a musician who was collecting folk-songs to ensure that they were preserved.

Sharp met Sister Emma in February and March 1909 shortly before she died in March of the same year. Sister Emma told Sharp that she had learned her songs from her mother and her nursemaid over 60 years earlier. She was able to sing to him twenty-six songs, ballads and nursery rhymes, remembering the words and tunes, some were new versions of known songs but some were unknown. There was a strong North Eastern element to the songs. Sister Emma's mother was descended from the Rankin family of Newcastle which explains this. Sister Emma is still talked about in modern folk circles and her words and tunes still played by people such as Steeleye Span and Martin Carthy, especially "Long Lankin" which is a gruesome tale of the murder of a mother and child, quite surprising for an elderly nun to sing.

Martin Graebe gave a talk at Whitby Folk Week in 1909 which covered the songs of Sister Emma and her real life sister, Edith Seymour Waring. Edith gave more songs from their family repertoire to Sabine Baring-Gould in 1905, but as this was under her married name of Lady Lethbridge it has taken over a century to discover the family relationship!

(Information about Cecil Sharp and Sister Emma comes from Matthew Edwards via Ancestry and The Mudcat Café)